

A THEOLOGY OF ORDINATION

The Christian Church is that body of people who have been reconciled to God and their fellow men in Jesus Christ. They are all members of a body of which Christ is the head. The Christian life, however, the new life in Christ within the Church is not its own end. Reconciliation to God in Christ means reconciliation to God's will and to God's redemptive purpose for mankind as disclosed in Jesus Christ. This is why the Christian, wherever he is, finds it his vocation to bring that part of God's creation into a reconciling fellowship with God and one's fellow man.

This Christian vocation, this life in the fellowship of Christ with a view to the salvation of mankind cannot--from a biblical viewpoint--be equated with any "clergy" or professional group. It is true, indeed, that looking back across centuries, one has to admit that the Christian churches have come to distinguish sharply between clergy and laity, between religious and secular vocations. But in the NT there is little sign of that deep vocational difference. Quite plainly, the NT word for clergy (klēros) refers not to a special order among Christians, but to ALL Christians. And the word for laity (laos) refers not to a recipient part of the Christian congregation, but to ALL Christians. All are called to one service, and all alike are God's people. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

The Christian life is by definition a ministry, and every member of the Body of Christ has a special function to fulfill, necessary to the health

of the whole organism, the Church, and to the realization of its mission in the world. There is nothing that a Christian does that he should not regard as the exercise of a ministry.

The ministry, therefore, is not an order of men, religiously different from those who are supposedly mere "laymen." It is not even a special group of men. The ministry is a function of the whole Church, distributed among its members according as God has given to each various gifts and capacities, and corresponding calls. It is not a group of Church officers. Rather, the ministry of the Church is its obligation under God to minister, as His servant, in reconciling the world to Himself. The ministry of the Church is its God-given function, its mission, its apostolate, its vocation.

The church ministries

But to minister thus, the Church by divine appointment also delegates to various officers specific aspects of its functions. Or, looking at it from the other side, God calls in a special manner certain members of the Church to devote all of their effort and time to the service of the gospel, and to take upon themselves one of those ministries that the Church has recognized to be necessary to its existence and its work. These church ministries--a term used in the absence of a better phrase, to describe the ministries that consequently cannot be exercised without its investiture--are bestowed and sanctioned by an ordination, a laying on of hands.

It is God who calls His ministers. But He does so through His Church. There is no denying that some who are not called of God may come into this office. Care is to be taken to guard against this. It remains, however,

that no man may be brought into the ministry without this election by the Church. This election, and it alone, is of the essence of the office. Since there is no essential religious character by which the minister differs from any other member of the Body of Christ, this election alone, by differentiating his function from that of the other believers, makes him a minister.

Ecclesiastical organization and church ministries

In one's study of the essence of the Church it soon becomes plain that the Church has an order, or an organization as we are used to calling it. This is not due to the fact that the Church lives in this everyday world and of necessity must adopt something of the forms of its social life. Not at all. The order of the Church is implicit in the service it is called upon to fulfill. Both as a local church and as a totality it is built from the functions which devolve upon it. Ordering is the necessary response of the Church as it determines, equips and sustains the special services or ministries necessary to its mission in the world. It approaches its task in a systematic, orderly way. Here again, however, the life of the Church is ordered from above, from Christ, who acts through His Spirit and His gifts.

But what are the marks of such an order? As Seventh-day Adventists, we have referred to Scripture and declared that we must adhere to its precepts. On this basis we have recognized several offices. To some, "pastors" is given, by the Church, the task of preaching and teaching, administering the sacraments, and pastoral care of souls. To others, local church "elders," is given the task of discipline and overseeing. To others, "deacons," is

given the care of the poor and the benevolent work of the congregation.

These officers function through governing bodies, called into existence by the Church, organized over each congregation and over larger areas of the Church as need may determine.

The mode of government in the Church has been delivered to us in the Scriptures. But it seems just as obvious that in matters of discipline and ordering God had little or no intention of telling us what must be done in each specific instance. It is true that there have always been those who want to "freeze" the process and insist that post-apostolic generations of Christians must reproduce exactly the "orders" or organizational specifics of the NT Church. In the NT we read of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, healers, leaders, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues, elders, deacons, and a few more as well. But I don't think that these functions are reported to us as permanent, inflexible "orders," "offices." They are, rather, displayed to us as the ways by which the Early Church ^{under the guidance of the Holy Spirit} deployed its forces in the light of the particular campaign on which it was embarked in its historical situation. I do recognize from the Scriptures that the functions of pastors, elders, and deacons must be permanently fulfilled if the Church is to expand and be preserved. That is what I mean when I say that the mode of government in God's Church has been delivered to us in Scripture. But I also do believe that what we have received in Scripture are general patterns of order and organization. That in matters of organization and external discipline it was not God's will to prescribe in detail. This, rather, is an integral, contextual part of our response to

God's act in Jesus Christ. Organization, as we have understood and experienced it in our Adventist history, is intrinsic to our obligation of theological reflection and responsible obedience in a spirit of submission to the divine revelation, and as we stand here and now, as the People of God, under the Word of God vis-a-vis the task given to us, the work of ministry assigned to us as the Body of Christ in the world.

Additional church ministries

For some time now, under the pressure of necessity, but I believe also under the impulse of the Spirit, we, as a church, have come to recognize and to institute other church ministries. Progressively, we have come to recognize such functions as ministers of administration, teachers, treasurers, auditors, not to mention the medical ministry. On the one hand new needs did appear, and on the other men and women did hear the call of God to dedicate their entire lives to the service of the Church in order to exercise a ministry different from, but complementary to, the strictly pastoral ministry. These, I believe, are founded on a divine calling and on the remnant church's recognition of this calling. They require, as does the pastoral ministry, the full effort and full time of those who undertake them. Like the pastoral ministry they have as a prerequisite an appropriate preparation. And although in a different and occasionally more limited form, they participate as it does in the ministry of the Word, in the teaching and in the cure of souls. The only difference between these ministries and the pastoral ministry is to be found essentially in the responsibilities entrusted and the competence attributed to them.

It may be helpful at this point to state precisely why the Church restricts the administration of the ordinances--called sacraments by others--to the church elders and the pastors, i.e. to its ordained ministers, for it is this fact more than any other that makes acceptable to so many people the erroneous idea that the pastorate, for instance, is a sort of priesthood. This restriction is a matter of order, not a sacramental matter. It is in order that it will be clear that there occurs in the administration of the sacraments an act of the Church; so that no one ought to perform it without the mandate of the Church.

What then is ordination?

But what then is ordination? I mean, what is ordination for the Seventh-day Adventist Church? You are probably aware of the fact that we have no elaborate doctrine of the ordination to the ministry. While the RCC has formulated in a clear and coherent doctrine the sense and the import of its ordinations, we have nothing similar in our official documents. On the other hand we are more fortunate than quite a few major Protestant bodies--for instance the Reformed Churches--who in their confessions of faith, or their liturgies, prescribe the act but usually say nothing at all as to what the act signifies and effects.

Chapter two of the SDA Manual for Ministers (pp. 11-22), for instance, deals with ordination to the ministry. Although some 90% of its content is devoted to matters of procedure, the examination of candidates for ordination, and the ordination service itself (the charge and the address of welcome), this chapter quoting the Constitution, Bylaws and Working Policy of the

General Conference defines ordination as "the setting apart of the man to a sacred calling, not for one local field alone, but for the entire church" (1942 edit., p. 12).

In the absence of a more elaborate declaration, let's read some statements of Ellen G. White on the meaning and implications of the ordination to the pastoral ministry.

The purpose of the laying on of hands is above all, in her eyes, "the sanction of the church" to the minister's going forth as a messenger to carry the most solemn message ever given to men (EW 101:1). In a time when false teachers threaten the very foundations of the Gospel message, men of faith who have given full proof that they have received their commission from God should be set apart "to secure the peace, harmony, and union of the flock" (EW 101:1). Going back to the days when Paul and Barnabas were solemnly dedicated to God by prayer and the laying on of hands, she concludes: "Thus they were authorized by the church, not only to teach the truth, but to perform the rite of baptism, and to organize churches, being invested with full ecclesiastical authority" (AA 161; GW 441). The statement is worth more than a passing glance. Their ordination was "a public recognition of their divine appointment to bear to the Gentiles the glad tidings of the gospel" (AA 161).

"It was merely setting the seal of the church upon the work of God--an acknowledged form of designation to an appointed office" (SR 304) adds she. In the same way early Adventist ministers, "having received their commission from God, and having the approbation of the church,...went forth baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and administering the ordinances of the Lord's house..." (EW 101), thus securing "the peace, harmony,

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1st ORDINATION
Pov. 1853 -
R. D. H. Dec 13: 1853
JAMES WHITE

1. APPROVAL of CH & BROTHER
2. TO PRODUCE & SECURE UNITY of Church
3. TO SHUT A DOOR AGAINST false Teachers in the Churches.

and union of the flock" (ibid.) It is most interesting in this setting to trace the context and history of what might have been in 1853 the first ordinations of Adventists ministers.

The ordination by the laying on of hands was "greatly abused" in the centuries that followed the founding of the Christian Church. "Unwarrantable importance" was attached to the rite, "as though a power came at once upon those who received such ordination, which immediately qualified them for any and all ministerial work," remarks Ellen White. Obviously, she saw no magic element in the ordination ceremony. She considers the laying on of hands, not as a sign effectual in itself, but as an external means of assuring the ordinand that God grants the grace sought by the Church in ~~his~~ ^{AA} ₁₆₂ behalf.

In what does this grace consist?

In what then does this grace consist? There is no doubt that God had abundantly blessed the labors of Paul and Barnabas during the year they spent together in Antioch. Both were gifted with grace when, through ordination, they were offered to God as ministers of the gospel. The gift was not at this point conferred on them in such a way that it can be said that it had not been previously given. Both excelled in doctrine and in other graces before they were ordained to the ministry. But there is no objection to saying that when God wished to avail Himself of the service of Paul and Barnabas, and called them, He then further molded them and filled them with new graces, multiplying those He had already given. When the leaders of the church in Antioch laid their hands upon these two men, "they, by that action, asked God to bestow His blessing upon the chosen apostles, in their devotion to the specific work to which they had been appointed" (AA 162).

On what authority and to what effect, then, is a man being ordained? He is to be ordained, I believe, because the Church has elected him to that office, and the effect of his ordination is merely formal introduction to that office. Those who ordain him do so, not because they possess this authority, right, or power, by virtue of being ordained ministers. They perform the ceremony of ordination merely because it is one of the duties which the Church has assigned to them.

It seems to me that the SDA concept of ordination can be summarized as follows: ¹ the Church recognizes by ordination the call that God has addressed to one of its members. ² It grants him authority for the exercise of the ministry within God's Church. ³ It prays earnestly on his behalf for the graces necessary to the work of this ministry. ⁴ It ordains him to the service of God, by the laying on of hands, and expresses its certainty that God grants its prayer.

If this is the meaning of ordination...

If this is the meaning and import of ordination, and if the pastoral ministry, although different from the other ministries of the Church, is nevertheless of the same nature, does it not follow that all those whom God calls to a ministry of the Church that requires their full effort and time should also be ordained to their particular ministries?

It is not without interest to notice that Ellen White considers that "medical missionaries who labor in evangelistic lines are doing a work of as high an order as are their ministerial fellow laborers" (EV 546).

Both are "engaged in the same work" (Ibid.). "The work of the true medical missionary," she adds, "is largely a spiritual work. It includes prayer and the laying on of hands; he therefore should be as sacredly set apart for his work as is the minister of the gospel. Those who are selected to act the part of missionary physicians are to be set apart as such" (EV 546).

In my opinion, there should be for each ministry of the Church a corresponding ordination proper to it. When the day comes that our church really recognizes, with all its implications, a plurality of church ministries, and ordains to their respective ministries all those who in response to God's calling wish to dedicate their lives to the furtherance of the gospel message, an end might be put to the confusion that now reigns in this matter. For instance, the difference between the pastoral ministry and the other ministries of the Church will be seen more clearly, and no longer falsely, as it too frequently is today--on the basis of some attributing to the pastorate, because it alone is sanctioned by ordination, some sort of a sacerdotal character. It will appear as one of the several ministries necessary to the Church, no longer as the only ministry in the full sense of the term, compared to which the others are only auxiliary ministries. I am looking forward to the day when God's Church, I mean God's remnant people as a body, in the light of divine revelation and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit will consider looking into the specific task that is incumbent upon each ministry, the role that belongs to it in the life and work of the Church, the skills that are accorded to it and the preparation it requires.

The issue of the church ministry of women

It is also possible that the recognition of a plurality of church ministries might help to resolve other delicate problems, among which is the problem of the church ministry of women. Neglected for so long, this problem is at present a preoccupation of churches across the entire world. We also seem to be eager to investigate it thoroughly. Each church, of course, will answer it in the light of its own understanding of the gospel, on the basis of its own assumptions. In fact, the assumptions of some Christian churches are such that they hesitate even to examine the question at all. It cannot be said that a full solution has yet been proposed, even within such bodies as the World Council of Churches. But it is permissible to wonder if at the moment, when our own Church has grasped the importance and probably the urgency of the matter, we have posed the question in the most correct terms. One is often limited to vindicating the right of women to undertake tasks hitherto reserved exclusively for men rather than seeking those for which the woman's own nature more particularly qualifies her.

Is this not confusing equality and identity? Let me add right away that there is also reason to wonder for which tasks the nature of man qualifies him, and to question the naive opinion that he is qualified for everything.

If the pastoral ministry had not been regarded for so long in our Church as in fact the only true church ministry, a ministry sanctioned by an ordination, would we have sought the solution of the problem of the church ministry of women in the pastoral office?

By way of conclusion

On the basis of what we have been discussing here and of my previous presentation on the relationship man-woman, I see no substantial theological argument to keep women in a second place, or to keep them from being ordained to a church ministry. At the same time, however, since ordination is an acknowledged form of designation by God's Church to an appointed office, the investment of full ecclesiastical authority, I wonder if it is wise to pass over too quickly the question whether or not ordination to the pastoral ministry is desirable for women as long as the Church as a whole, sensitive to the guidance of the Spirit, has not recognized God's leading in that direction.

The trouble, to me, seems to be elsewhere. In most--if not all--Christian churches, women have had to work in subordinate ways, without the setting of the ordained. They have had little access to the public forums or to the leadership roles inherent in the pastoral ministry or conferred by ordination. They could hardly participate in policy setting or decision making, let alone hold office. An appropriate mode of ordination in the context of a plurality of ministries would recognize them, along with all those who dedicate their whole life and effort to the furtherance of the everlasting gospel, a fulness of ministry with all that this implies. A ministry as valued as the pastoral ministry, the latter being one among many ministries.

This approach to the problem of ordination means hard work and reciprocal understanding, for we are dealing with prejudice and self-interest--on both sides--as well as established patterns and deep-rooted attitudes.

*Good
Suggestion*

But I dare suggest that we may as well work for a better and more useful ministry for all rather than give our efforts to perpetuate the all too exclusive concept of ministry. That there be many ministries corresponding to many gifts and many needs seems to me more faithful to the origin of the Christian ministry, and possibly more helpful to our own times.

The theology of ordination and its implications, summarily evoked in these few pages, is without doubt one that our church must address itself to sooner or later. Its study is indispensable. And as a theologian I hope that a great many will participate in this study, and will contribute, so that God's People will find a sound solution to the problems that are proper to it.

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September, 1973